

Chronicles of heartache

British historian Simon Schama's second volume of Jewish history is a mixed bag of hits and misses **By Tibor Krausz**

THE HISTORY of Jews is a long series of tragedies, punctuated by epic calamities and interspersed with occasional spells of relative bliss that manifested itself in freedom from persecutions, discrimination, pogroms and genocide. Now and again came periods of tragicomedy brought on by charismatic rabbis and self-styled messiahs who triggered outbursts of fervent hope for redemption at last.

One harbinger of imminent salvation fetched up in Venice in the winter of 1523, soon after the mass expulsion of Jews from the Iberian Peninsula. Claiming to be a warrior prince from a Lost Tribe of Israel, David Ha-Reuveni, a diminutive and enigmatic ascetic with plenty of tall tales to tell, found a receptive audience for his assurances that the glorious ruler of a strong and prosperous (and hitherto unknown) Jewish kingdom was just about to come to the aid of Europe's beleaguered Jews and Christians who were facing the constant threat of invasion and subjugation from a belligerent Ottoman empire.

The Marranos were especially susceptible to the siren call of this strange little man who dressed ostentatiously in an Oriental style and professed to hail from a magical Jewish realm just beyond the edge of the known world where the Sambatyon River, whose waters rested on the Shabbat, flowed. This was an era where strange new lands were being discovered by seafaring Europeans with amazing frequency so anything seemed possible.

During his travels around Mediterranean Europe, where his newfound fame routinely preceded him, Ha-Reuveni had an audience with Pope Clement VII, met with the Emperor Charles V, and parleyed with King John III of Portugal. To all of these Christian sovereigns he proposed a grand military alliance with the Jewish warriors of the Lost Tribes against the Ottomans in exchange for arquebuses, cannons and battleships. Inevitably, the peripatetic fabulist came a cropper, meeting his end at the hands of the Inquisition.

A century later came another huckster with messianic pretensions. Sabbatai Zevi, too, promised instant salvation for Europe's long-suffering Jews. In the mid-17th century, right at the time of the appalling massacre of Jews in Ukraine by Bogdan Chmielnicki's Cossacks, the mercurial Jewish mystic, who was fairly well versed in Lurianic Kabbalah, pronounced himself to be the long awaited Messiah, who would deliver his people from the constant depredations of Christians and Muslims. Zevi promised to gather the Lost Tribes of Israel from their remote exiles and rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem.

The self-deluded "holy man," who hailed from Smyrna in Turkey, managed to trigger widespread messianic fervor far and wide in European Jewish communities, but like his predecessor he, too, ended his salvific career in ignominy. Zevi was arrested in 1666 in Constantinople on the orders of the sultan and charged with sedition. To save his skin, the Jewish mystic apostatized and converted to Islam, living out the rest of his days outwardly as a Muslim.

It would not be for another two centuries when yet another prominent self-made Jewish liberator appeared on the scene. This one, though, did manage to bring a form of salvation to European Jews, albeit only posthumously. The Hungarian journalist Theodore Herzl, the progenitor of political Zionism, would succeed where both Ha-Reuveni and Zevi had failed. A charismatic intellectual with the mien of a modern Moses, Herzl created a movement that would go on to resurrect the Jewish state in Palestine after an absence of two millennia.

And so, thanks to Herzl and like-minded Zionists, Jewish millennialism, which had long been a province of pious mountebanks and delusional fabulists, found its true salvific power in the pragmatism of secular Jewish nationalism that was shorn of time-honored religious superstitions and yet was inescapably inspired by them.

In "Belonging: The Story of the Jews 1492-1900," a well-received new book by promi-

nent British Jewish historian Simon Schama, all three champions of Jewish emancipation and nationhood show up in due course. Yet they do so confined to their own time and social milieu with little, if anything, connecting them. They're joined by no ideological threads and they serve as no historical antecedents for one another. It's as if they, or the ideas that motivated them, came and went in isolation without leaving much of an impact on successive generations.

Therein lies the problem with "Belonging." The book isn't so much a coherent account of Jewish history (perhaps Schama felt there were plenty enough of those already) as a colorful diorama of episodes handpicked, often seemingly at random, from Jewish life throughout the centuries.

This approach isn't without its merits, yet it makes for a disjointed and overly impressionistic work. For long stretches "Belonging" reads like a historian's learned reveries strung together to relay, in stream-of-consciousness fashion, whatever happens to catch his fancy as he hopscoches around various locales in various decades through the centuries to uncover telltale episodes of Jewish history from across Europe as the Late Middle Ages gave way to the Renaissance, the Reformation triggered the Counter-Reformation, and the Age of Revolutions birthed the modern world.

The book is the second volume in a planned trilogy of Jewish history spanning three millennia from the first stirrings of Judaism among tribes of desert dwellers to our own era. In this volume, four highly eventful centuries are bookended by two landmarks in Jewish history: the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492 and the dawn of the 20th century, which would see the mass murder of European Jewry on an industrial scale and the creation of a new Jewish state in Palestine.

In between these two transformative epochs the Jews of Europe hardly had it easy. For centuries Jews tended to be, Schama surmises, "forever intimidated, abused,

publicly humiliated, marked with badges of identity; penned into ghettos, brutalised, imprisoned without cause; robbed, sent packing into the storm with barely the clothes on their backs.”

That just about sums it up. Yet now and again, here and there, were moments of sudden Jewish flowerings in self-contained milieus of relative tolerance: a German duchy, an Ottoman sultan’s court, a Dutch city, an Italian city state. It’s these episodes that largely occupy the historian, even if they invariably ended in blood and tears. These interludes of Jewish cultural, religious and social revival were assisted by what Schama calls “the benevolence of the blind eye,” whereby Christians and Muslims tolerated Jews in their midst, even if they tended to do so less out of avowed fellowship than through mutually beneficial financial and social arrangements.

Yet Jews benefited handsomely just the same. Their fortunes waxed and waned with the mood swings of their Christian and Ottoman overlords. Tolerance facilitated self-made prosperity and a flourishing of Jewish life in relative freedom. Renewed persecution drove them back into the cramped confines of filthy *shtetls* and walled ghettos. Outdoors they were forced to wear identifying pieces of clothing, like cone-shaped yellow hats, to mark them out.

Schama, who teaches history at Columbia University in New York, is an engaging writer with a keen eye for telling details, and his fondness for colorful characters helps enliven what might otherwise be a rather dreary tale of heartache and sorrow.

Judah Leon Abravanel, a poet, philosopher and dramaturge; Abraham Colorni, an engineer, inventor and magician; Dona Gracia Mendes, a supremely rich Marrano spice merchant from Lisbon; Joseph Nasi, a powerful factotum in the court of the Ottoman Sultan Selim II; Daniel Mendoza, a feisty bare-knuckle boxer in the reign of the English King George III – they all make cameos in “Belonging,” each hogging the limelight for a while, as they ply their trades from Matua to Prague to Istanbul to London. There were also prominent Jewish physicians and apothecaries, adept Jewish jewelers and goldsmiths, innovative Jewish tailors and perfumers, inspired Jewish thinkers and kabbalists, famed Jewish entertainers and card sharps, lowly Jewish rag traders and moneylenders, wealthy Jewish merchants and bankers.

It’s a fascinating panoply. Yet without cohesive thematic links and clear narrative threads it all adds up to a bit of a hodgepodge. The book’s essence boils down to little more than “this happened, that happened, this Jew did this, that Jew did that.” To be sure, history isn’t a process with a clear direction (it only seems so in hindsight) but a largely helter-skelter mishmash of events that wind up leading to particular outcomes. Thus historians cannot but be selective in their readings of the past. Yet oftentimes Schama picks and chooses his subject matters erratically, sidelining larger trends in the process.

The Chmielnicki massacre, which saw tens of thousands of Ukrainian and Polish Jews murdered with appalling brutality within the space of a few months in 1648-49, is afforded only a few throwaway lines. And this in a doorstopper of a volume in which the author spends long pages on the minutiae of life in 17th-century Amsterdam and on the biographies of minor local Jewish notables who ended up as subjects for the portraits painted by the Dutch master Rembrandt. Likewise, for most of the book Schama shuns happenings in Eastern Europe, focusing his attention instead solely on the continent’s western regions.

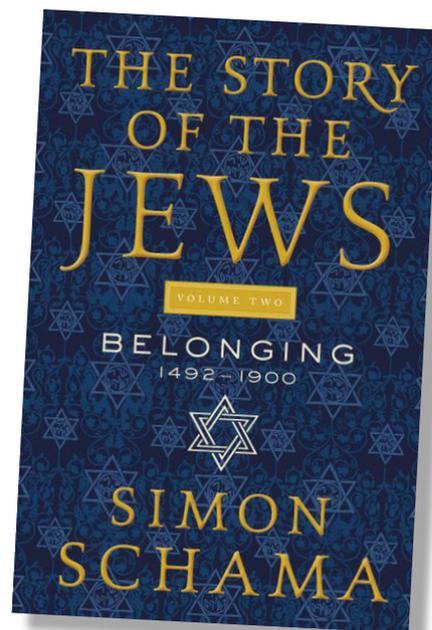
Added to such puzzling omissions are equally puzzling errors of fact. The historian informs us, for instance, that Suleiman the Magnificent, who built the famous wall of Jerusalem’s Old City, died in September 1566 during a siege “in Transylvania.” The militant sultan did die that year during his siege of a beleaguered Christian stronghold but nowhere near Transylvania. He did so at Szigetvár (“island castle”) in what is now southwestern Hungary, during one of the most famous pitched battles in that country’s history.

That said, recurrent flashes of brilliance rescue the book from being a letdown. Schama is most in his element while discussing, in learned tones, the modernizing mission of brilliant minds like the 18th-century German-Jewish polymath Moses Mendelssohn, whose ideas helped trigger the *Haskalah*, or Jewish Enlightenment. It was a heady era when incipient Jewish emancipation and fledgling Jewish self-assertion were rubbing up against reactionary tendencies, within both Jewish communities and their larger societies. Traditions pulled in one direction, the appeals of new learning in another.

In the end, this intellectually turbulent period gave rise both to Jewish modernism, with its eager embrace of science and sec-

ular humanism, and to its backward-gazing antithesis in the form of religious obscurantism. The former was exemplified by an unceasing parade of Jewish scientists, thinkers and artists, who took the world by storm with their groundbreaking ideas and peerless artistry. The latter manifested itself in Haredi Judaism, which would end up imprisoning Jews in self-imposed ghettos and locking their minds into a medieval milieu of received certainties as espoused by charismatic rabbis.

This schism has carried on unabated to this day. Then again, such pitched battles of wits within Jewish thought are, in many ways, merely replays of the ferocious ideological tug of war that pit philosophizing Hellenizers in ancient Judea against steadfast Biblical literalists. Schama did well in chronicling that ancient battle, which took its toll on lives and reputations alike, in the first volume of his planned three-part saga, “Finding the Words 1000 BCE–1492 CE.” In that book the celebrated historian generally kept his focus and refrained from the jarring hopscotches of his ever-wandering attention. One wishes he’d done that this time around too. ■



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